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ABSTRACT

Genuine intellectual and other pre-academic skills and abilities are as important as social skills for children's smooth transition into kindergarten and continued school success. Head Start was originally conceived to prepare preschoolers from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in elementary school. Now that the program has earned renewed public and political credibility, preschool policymakers and practitioners should review and critique representative Head Start practices and policies. Contemporary theories and practices worth examining include: (1) a model to be used in situations in which grandparents play a significant role in children's upbringing; (2) the use of user-friendly computers in preschool programs; (3) appropriate measures of children's achievement in preschool; and (4) risk factors prevalent in impoverished settings, such as violence, drug abuse, and teen parenthood. To sharpen its focus on ensuring children's smooth and successful transition into school, Head Start should upgrade the quality of its preschool program, making the curriculum more difficult and challenging. The program should acknowledge and facilitate children's readiness to read and write, mathematical and computer skills, artistic creativity, and ability to cope with dysfunctional family dynamics. These abilities are extensions of basic symbolic communication skills that preschool children have already begun to master. Head Start's goal of social competence should be grounded in solid personal excellence. Contains 40 references. (HTH)

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HEAD START'S OPPORTUNITY & RESPONSIBILITY

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over 25 years Head Start
PRESCHOOL SERVICES DEPARTMENT SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

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PRESCHOOL READINESS TO LEARN: HEAD START'S OPPORTUNITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

by John H. Meier[1]

Head Start has rightly risen to a very visible and favorable status in the public and political consciousness. The U.S. Department of Education has issued a statement of national goals, the first of which is that each child will enter the public school system "ready to learn" (MacDonald, 1991). Head Start's national standards for program performance include the overall goal to increase social competence, defined as a child's ability to deal with both the present environment and later responsibilities in school and life; it includes intellectual development, mental health, and other developmental factors. This compatibility of goals represents both a serious responsibilty and challenging opportunity for Head Start to fine tune its program to meet present needs and future expectations.

When the concept of social competence was first defined for measurement by Doll (1953), it was an all-encompassing term, describing general human development. The concept, as proposed by Zigler (1970) and exhaustively reviewed by Zigler and Trickett (1978) for Head Start's primary goal, has a developmentally universal and consequently imprecise connotation, which may

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[1]This paper was presented in the afternoon of April 29, 1992, just before the riots occurred later that day in nearby Los Angeles, 27 years after the infamous Watts riots in 1965. Also in 1965, Head Start was formally launched as part of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity's program in the War on Poverty; it was designed to provide some employment and child care to help defuse the cumulative and inflammatory frustration and hopelessness among the Nation's impoverished and disenfranchised families. This writer has been directly or indirectly involved in the evolution of Head Start from its inception and remains dedicated to its continued refinement and success as a growing National comprehensive child development and family support program.

inadvertently serve as a screen behind which irrelevant and/or dilute curricula masquerade as enlightened socialization experiences.

As times and trends change, it is necessary to realign the priorities for preschool programs which are defined and designed to facilitate the optimum growth and development of the children (and families) they serve. The relatively vague term of social competence, because of its interpersonal connotation is either inadequate in itself or too general to ensure sufficiently focused preparation and intrapersonal excellence of preschool children for success in the public schools. Although it is readily agreed that preschool should enhance social skills and positive self-esteem, it is herewith respectfully submitted that genuine intellectual and other pre-academic skills and abilities are at least equally important for short term smooth transition into kindergarten and long term continued success and enjoyment ot school and career. It is fine to help children feel good about their social capabilities, but it is the ultimate betrayal to puff up children's sense of competence based on their ability to get along with peers, when their core personal competence to understand and master themselves and their environment is neglected and subsequently found embarrassingly deficient.

This raises the continuing controversy over attempts to measure the short and long-term impact of massive societal programs such as Head Start. Much of the impetus for Head Start was anchored in and arose from the rennaisance writings of Bloom (1964) and Hunt (1961), who made an appealing case for

early childhood enrichment programs to compensate for the inevitable developmental deficits inherent in children who grow up in the "culture of poverty" (Lewis, 1961) with its attendant environmental deprivation. Thus, a major battle in the 1965 War on Poverty was to fight the recurring and discouraging fact that children in impoverished and otherwise disenfranchised families never got off to an even start in traditional school and were deemed to devastating disappointment and failure for life. Head Start proponents even suggested that such a massive compensatory preschool program would in effect innoculate its participants against future academic failure.

However, many studies of the efficacy of early intervention programs, including Head Start, reported over the past three decades, have yielded mixed findings. Nevertheless, reports by Copple, Cline and Smith (1987), Darlington, et al. (1980), and others document many favorable longitudinal effects on preschool graduates in subsequent school years -- such societally desirable results as less juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, child abuse, school dropout, grade repetition, special education, and welfarism. Preschool studies such as those beginning with infant and toddler intervention and reported by Honig and Lally (1981), Ramey (1983), and others are even more impressive, but far more demanding and expensive to replicate, let alone to multiply to meet the intensive and extensive needs of millions of children and families living in poverty.

Head Start was originally conceived to prepare preschoolers from so-called

disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in elementary school (Stone & Church, 1984; Weikart, 1967; and others). The gains in measured intelligence and/or academic achievement, after the children grew older and were no longer in compensatory or enrichment programs, seemed to fade away and this "wash-out" phenomenon discouraged many proponents and encouraged many critics of early intervention efforts. Consequently, especially during its first decade, this high-risk government brainchild had a very tenuous existence, with many would-be assassins aiming their cost-benefit slings and arrows at its financial heart.[2]

Now that Head Start has earned and enjoys renewed public and political credibility, it seems important to further investigate and implement increasingly sophisticated approaches to improving children's personal excellence in intellectual and other academically significant developmental domains, to ensure their success in the traditional school system. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the complex controversy regarding how to change the traditional school system to better meet young children's multidimensional needs through more developmentally appropriate early childhood programs (Bredekamp, 1987; Elkind, 1987; and others). Suffice it to say that Head Start graduates with both social competence and excellent pre-academic skills have

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[2]This writer vividly remembers testifying before the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee in 1977 as Director of the U.S. Office of Child Development (OCD, now ACYF) and being asked for a plan to eliminate Head Start, since it allegedly was not sufficiently cost-beneficial; fortunately, the draft results of a national 10 year longitudinal study on the efficacy of 10 representative preschool programs had just been released (Lazar, et al., 1977) and enabled us champions of the cause to persuade the Congress to nearly double the funding for the coming fiscal year, rather than to eliminate another controversial but quite efficacious Federal program.

a high probability of successfully entering the regular schools and this should result in a simultaneous reciprocal rapprochement between Head Start and the schools.

It is critical and timely that preschool policy-makers and practitioners review and critique representative current Head Start practices and underlying policies. Moreover, in the context of Head Start's past achievements and present activities, readers are encouraged to review and consider for future implementation some of the contemporary ideas and forces presently bombarding preschool theorists and practitioners. These include concepts and practices advanced by: Bronfenbrenner (1990), who addresses the importance of the impact of the many elements in the entire ecology, especially the immediate family dynamics, on a preschool child's holistic development; Collins (1991) and Smith (1991), who identify the "Two-Generation" scope of Head Start and imply that a "Three-Generation" model is appropriate in many situations where grandparents are playing a significant role, especially in multi-problem, single parent families; Deloria (1991), who demonstrates the efficacy of increasingly user-friendly computers in preschool programs; Meier, (1970a) and Moore and Anderson, (1960), who seek to install more autotelic responsive preschool classroom environments (wherein learning and problem-solving are their own rewards) and open system comprehensive preschool curricula (Meier, 1970b) facilitate such learning; Bergan, et al. (1989), who are developing more appropriate measures of preschool achievement; Sternberg (1986), who is

redefining the comprehensive and kaleidoscopic nature of multiple intelligences; by Garbarino (1991), Lewis (1992), and others, who chronicle the devastating accumulation of risk factors such as violence, drug-abuse, unwed teen parents, etc., which are relatively more prevalent within impoverished settings; McCormick, et al. (1992), who further document the increased morbidity of very low-birth weight children during preschool and early school years; Kerr, et al. (1991), who present a cogent case for an early start in preschool literacy training for academically at-risk children; Lashoff & Specht (1992), who argue eloquently for a network of neighborhood family centers,[3] which can provide integrated services to all eligible needy families; Besharov, Fuerst & Fuerst, Slavin, Zigler, et al. (1992), who make varied arguments for using the limited resources to serve fewer needy children and families with higher quality more intensive programs, at the admitted risk of letting lesser needy children and families fall through the bureaucratic cracks; corporate preschool efforts such as Hasbro's Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), Quaker Oats' Corporate School of America, and Fannie Mae's Futures 500; and, Barrett & Depinet (1991), Greenspan & Granfield (1992), and Siperstein (1992), who reevaluate the concepts of social, intellectual, and general developmental competence in light of accumulated and current wisdom.

The bottom line is that Head Start has an attractive opportunity, indeed an

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[3] It seems ironic that one of this writer's legacies while serving in the federal government was to successfully argue for changing the name of the Office of Child Development to incorporate families (hence, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families) in a paper agitating for a network of neighborhood family service centers (Meier, 1978).

ethical responsibility, to sharpen its focus on ensuring a smooth and successful transition of its graduates into the elementary schools, however inadequate they may seem. This requires an upgrading of preschool program quality and quantity, making the curriculum more difficult and challenging. This includes a greater emphasis on learning how to learn and using symbols such as letters, numbers, music and art forms, and taking advantage of the increasing availability and child-friendliness of space-age technology such as recently developed, exciting, and informative audio-visual programs and computer hardware and software. Considering the optimal mental health and positive self-concept of the child, Head Start must do everything within its capacity to ensure a solid and secure preschool experience through which to empower the child (and family) to succeed from the very first day in kindergarten or elementary school.

Every human is ready to learn, and in fact begins learning even before birth. The learning of one or more languages for at least basic communication during the first four years of life is a magnificent example of human preschool learning and capacity for greater, more complex achievement. The readiness and desire to continue learning at the appropriate peer level upon entry into elementary school is essential for a child's sense of authentic personal competence and positive self-esteem. When a child is ready to read and write (in one or more languages), calculate probabilities or program a computer, play the drums or violin, develop a dance or produce a play, or negotiate a better

way of coping with dysfunctional family dynamics, why not acknowledge these interests and facilitate (and assess) these competencies as contributing to the continuity of growth and development? These abilities are extensions of basic symbolic communication skills, which preschool children have already begun to master in their spoken language and will continue to use, elaborate upon, and need for survival and success during the remainder of their lives. Yes, let's facilitate social competence for all Head Start graduates -- but be sure that it is grounded in solid personal excellence. Can we afford to provide less for all of our nation's children and their families?[1]

1. The foregoing ideas are largely those of the writer, with embellishment from several fellow workers at the Preschool Services Department of San Bernardino County (686 East Mill Street, San Bernardino, CA 92408, Hortense Hunn, Director). Ideas expressed do not necessarily represent the official position of the County and any errors, misrepresentations, or oversights are the writer's.

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